



Holly & The

HENCHMAN

THE VERY MERRY MOB
CASSIE MINT

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Holly & The Henchman

OceanofPDF.com

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Contents

[1. Holly.](#)

[2. Diego](#)

[3. Holly.](#)

[4. Diego](#)

[5. Holly.](#)

[6. Diego](#)

[7. Holly.](#)

[8. Diego](#)

[9. Holly.](#)

[*Teaser: Kingpin All The Way.*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

One

Holly



O*ne month ago*

The Governor's office is stately. It's all polished wood, fine leather and the glint of brass, with rows of hardback books on high shelves, their spines never once cracked open since being put on display. An antique globe stands in one corner of the large room, and whenever I dust its surface on my rounds, I hear bottles clink inside.

I hate cleaning in here. This whole room feels... wrong. Like there's bad energy or malevolent spirits or something. I'm not a superstitious girl, but if I were, I'd refuse point blank to clean the Governor's office.

My plain black lace-up shoes sink into the rug. I clear my throat as I approach the desk. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

The Governor glances up from the newspaper spread over the desk, his eyes running down my body from head to toe.

I press my palms against my gray maid's dress, wishing it were baggier. Or floor length. Hell, made of burlap—anything

to keep those cold eyes off my body.

“Ah.” My employer glances at a post-it note curling off the desk near his elbow. “Holly, is it? Yes, take a seat.”

The visitor’s chair is at least two inches lower than the Governor’s own. I sink down onto it, mouth dry, and observe the man across from me.

Salt and pepper hair, artfully arranged to hide the way it’s thinning on top, and a tailored three piece suit; expensive cuff links and a sour way of sucking in his cheeks. My employer looks like someone stuffed a bird of prey into fine tailoring. After his meteoric rise, he should be preening, but he’s not.

The Governor has taken the political world by storm over the summer, has risen from relative obscurity to sudden power, and yet it’s still not enough.

You can tell from the downward slash of his mouth, and the pinch of his graying eyebrows: this is not a man who knows how to be satisfied. ‘Enough’ is an foreign word to men like Governor Edwards.

I knit my clammy fingers together in my lap. “How can I be of assistance, sir?”

You know, this man may give me the heebie-jeebies, but I barely see him in my day-to-day work. And I *like* this job. When I applied for the maid position, I figured it’d be a stop gap on my way to something better; that it would be boring, horrible work. And okay, it does get dull for the last hour or so

of my shift, but mostly it's meditative. A good workout, too. My arms have never been this toned.

Whatever I've done, I really hope I can fix it. Ruthie's relying on me to help make rent.

The Governor's chair creaks as he leans back, tugging open a desk drawer. He addresses its contents, his tone bored. "Your sister Ruth also works for the Edwards family, does she not?"

I nod, lips pressed together. Why is he asking about Ruth? Is he breaking the ice? We don't need to *chat*, he's my employer.

Whatever he wants me to do, he can just come out with it. No need to feign interest.

"Yes, she works as an aide to—"

"My son." Governor Edwards sucks on his teeth, pulling a paper file out of the drawer. He slaps it onto the desk surface and pushes it toward me, crinkling the newspaper beneath. "Take a look, Hannah."

"It's Holly." My fingers shake as I flip the file open.

The Governor grunts, and as a single syllable, it speaks volumes. It says, clear as day: *I don't care about your name, girl.*

That's fine. I'd rather he didn't notice me at all.

Inside the file are several sheets of paper, some scrawled with handwriting, some typed. There are restaurant receipts, a

hotel room key, and...

I pinch the photograph between finger and thumb, my chest suddenly tight. Is it me, or is this room stuffy as hell? I can't—can't *breathe*.

“My son's, I believe. Ruth is too far along to change her mind now,” the Governor says idly, flicking a speck of lint off his sleeve. “Hides it well, doesn't she?”

The image is black and white, grainy but easy to read. My sister's baby is sucking its thumb in the womb.

“Oh my god.” I clatter back in my chair, my body damp with sweat under my uniform. This is—wonderful. Of course. We'll love this baby more than anyone in the whole world. But rents have been climbing higher, and we've already cut back every possible expense, and...

I blink up at the Governor. “Why are *you* showing me this?”

His smile makes my gut twist.

“Your sister Ruth is at a crossroads, Holly.” My boss spreads one palm over the file and its contents, the receipts crinkling. “She's rather backed herself into a corner.”

Well, it takes two to make a baby, I think furiously, but I swallow the words down and simmer in silence.

I can't make an enemy of this man. He's too powerful, holding all our futures in his gnarled grasp.

He starts tapping one finger on the file, drumming out a slow, agonizing rhythm. I can't look away from his manicured fingertip, not until he says, "Shall I tell you what lies down each fork in the road for your sister?"

I nod stiffly, shaking off wild daydreams of pushing him in front of a speeding car. "Yes, sir."

He clears his throat, settling in like he's telling a bedtime story. *Tap... tap... tap...*

"Down one road, Ruth is welcomed into the Edwards family. My son won't marry her of course—a simple dalliance can't ruin his life—but both child and mother receive full financial support and all the protection of the Edwards name. Things like college tuition and healthcare costs are not concerns that cross your sister's mind. She's free to pursue her own interests and raise her child as she sees fit—within reason, of course."

Within reason.

Right.

"And down the second path?"

Because there are worse things than struggling for money. Don't get me wrong, it sucks like hell, but it might still be a better trade than living under Governor Edwards' thumb forevermore.

Tap... tap... tap...

"Down the second path, Ruth is fired without references, her name dragged through the mud. Charges are brought

against her for stealing from the Edwards property. For attempted blackmail, too.”

I inhale sharply. “Ruth would *never*—”

“You would also be fired, without references, and left to support both mother and child. With all the extra shifts you’d have to work, I wonder if you would even find the time to visit her in prison?”

I grip the edge of the desk, dizzy with rage.

There’s a paperweight in the corner of the table. It looks heavy. Like with enough force, it could dent an old politician’s skull.

I *have* been scrubbing a lot lately. Bet I could do it.

“Which fork in the road will Ruth go down? The choice is yours, Holly.”

I tear my eyes away from the paperweight and meet the Governor’s cold gaze. His eyes are brown, but there’s not a speck of warmth to them. It’s like peering into a wintry pond. “Mine?”

“This could all end happily for Ruth. Her future depends on your cooperation.”

I already scrub this man’s toilets. What more can he want from me?

“I’m a maid,” I say flatly. “All I do is clean.”

“And listen.” *Tap... tap... tap...* “I expect you hear things, too. Staff always do. The uniform makes you invisible, you

see.”

Straightening my back, I force the words between stiff lips. “I am discreet, Governor Edwards. If that is your concern, you needn’t have threatened my sister. Whatever I hear or see under this roof is none of my business.”

“I agree, of course,” the Governor says, frowning slightly at the ultrasound, “but it’s not me that I want you to clean for. And I don’t want your discretion in this, Holly. I want to hear every sordid detail.”

Ugh.

Spying.

He’s talking about spying.

On a political opponent? If I get caught, they’ll ruin my life just as easily as the man across from me—more easily, in fact, because their accusations will actually be true.

But Ruthie...

“Your opponents come here sometimes.” Maybe I can reason my way out of this. “They might recognize me.”

The Governor shakes his head, eyes gleaming. “It’s not a political colleague I want you to clean for, Holly. Tell me: have you heard of the De Rossi crime family?”

My stomach sinks all the way to the wine cellar.

Of course I’ve heard of the De Rossis. I haven’t been living under a rock.

And now I'm sure: there's no way I'll survive until Christmas.

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Two

Diego



P*resent day*

She's in the library. Holly. The little blonde maid that started work here last month; the number one suspect on my list of potential moles. God knows where a tiny scrap of a girl like that would find the bravado to spy on Santo De Rossi, but the timing lines up.

I hate that fact.

The library is dim, the ornate sconces casting golden pools of light, and Holly stretches up onto her toes to dust the higher bookshelves. As she reaches up, the hem of her black maid's dress rises up her thighs.

One inch. Maybe two.

Just enough to show an extra strip of soft, secret skin.

Tucked outside on the balcony, swallowed up by shadows, I watch her without blinking. There's a ladder attached to the bookshelves: one of those old-fashioned ones on rails meant to

help readers reach the highest tomes, but either she hasn't noticed it, or she doesn't trust it to hold her. Well, Holly can't weigh more than her feather duster, can she? I could lift her in the palm of my hand.

Should I tell her? I could slide the glass doors open and poke my head inside, nodding at the ladder a few feet to her left. Would it scare her to learn I'm so near? I came out here for fresh air and some goddamn silence, but once she came into the library fifteen minutes ago, I should've made myself known. Instead, I moved closer and watched her, my breath fogging the glass.

I'm stupid over this girl. Something about her calls to me—maybe it's her small, slender frame, so delicate and... fuck, so breakable. Or maybe it's the swing of her icy blonde bob when she turns her head, the hair so soft-looking and pretty. Ever since she started working here, I've been walking around with a ball of tension in my gut, and it's not just suspicion.

I've been *wanting* her.

And losing sleep over it, too, tossing and turning every night until I give in and take myself in hand. Picturing her for just a few minutes, in that little maid's uniform or out of it. With or without the apron. Either way.

Inside, Holly grunts softly, straining to reach higher. I inhale, my heart pounding.

I want her to make that sound again. Want it so badly I can't think straight, and I need to be closer so I can hear it properly, nothing between us and no wind in my ears.

Because Holly doesn't *act* like a spy. There's no cunning to her; no calculating gleam in her gaze. The few times I spoke to her already, she flushed bright pink and stammered in response, tripping over her words... but maybe that's all an act. A rehearsed display.

If it *is* an act, it's fucking genius. I'm Santo De Rossi's scarred, brutal enforcer, and I've never been more disarmed than when that girl blinks up at me, lips parting. I want to lay my hands on her alright, but not to hurt her. Not for interrogation.

Only to coax out a certain kind of scream.

Inside the library, she rocks onto one foot, gripping a shelf for balance, straining and stretching to reach higher. Her feather duster quivers. Okay, time to move.

I slide the door open silently, padding across the rug with light steps. People don't expect it, what with the beard and the brawn, but I can move quietly when I want to—and when it comes to Holly, I'm *always* battling the urge to prowl after her in the shadows. Wrestling with my final scraps of nobility, trying not to descend completely into the darkness.

In here, without that pane of glass between us, I can hear everything. Her steady breaths; the rustle of her uniform; the silken slide of her hair against her collar. The creak of the floorboards beneath her shifting weight. She looks so small by those shelves, wobbling on one foot as she reaches up, and when she curses under her breath, I hear that too.

“Need a hand?”

Holly jolts, her feather duster clattering to the floor. She spins around, cheeks red and eyes wide.

“Oh! Mr Cedrone—”

She breaks off as I crouch down to pick up her feather duster. Down here, with my elbows resting on my knees, my face is level with her stomach, the taut planes of her belly pushing against the cotton of her dress with each breath. If I pressed my face against her stomach, would I feel her body heat? Would she let me rub my face on her and breathe her in?

See, it's thoughts like that that make me think I'm losing my grip. I push reluctantly to my feet. “Dusting the shelves?”

Holly pauses before she answers, and it's *this*, shit like this that makes her suspect number one. Why's she gotta think through her answer? It should be an immediate yes, no pause required.

“Um. Yes. But I couldn't reach high enough—”

“There's a ladder.”

She follows my nod and blinks, cheeks flushing even brighter. “Oh. Wow, I guess I didn't look properly.”

Not very spy-like. That's good. “It's safe if you want to use it.”

“Thanks.”

We stand there, awkward silence wrapping around us, and I curse myself for ever coming in here. I could've watched her for a while longer, maybe seen another glimpse of hidden

thigh, and what do I care if Santo's top bookshelves don't get dusted? No skin off my nose.

Out there in the darkness, I could've looked my fill. Could've stared at Holly until my eyes ran dry, the wind howling all around.

The maid clears her throat, her pulse tapping out a fast rhythm beneath her jaw. "Is there anything I can do for you, Mr Cedrone?"

Oh, there are hundreds of things this girl could do for me, and they all flash before my eyes. Things on her back or on her knees; things with her dress rucked up around her waist. Things that end with my teeth on her throat and my seed spilling out of her, trickling down those creamy thighs.

And other things too, that somehow feel even more shameful. Things like her pressing a soft kiss against my beard, or sitting in my lap for hours and telling me about her day. Smoothing down the creases in my shirt, or teasing me for the dusting of gray at my temples. *Sentimental* things.

Jesus.

"Yeah." I wrench my gaze away from her, feeling trapped. Feeling wild. "Yeah, do me a favor, okay? Don't linger in this room—in fact, don't linger in any room, Holly. Do your job, then get out. Okay? You don't want to draw attention to yourself, do you?"

Because if Holly's the spy... I don't know how I'll handle that. We've barely spoken, and already I think it might break

something in me.

Her lips press together and she nods once. She's staring at the floor now, and won't look up, and I can't blame her, what with me barking orders like that. Was that really necessary?

Time to follow my own advice. I turn around and get the hell out of there.

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Three

Holly



He's on to me. De Rossi's enforcer: the man with a ragged scar on his cheek and swollen knuckles on his right hand, like he doled out one too many punches and the bones have never recovered. He knows I'm the spy.

Or he suspects, at least. Because if he knew for sure, I'd already be dead, right? Sinking down to the river bed with cement boots on my feet. But last night in the library, he dismissed me with this glare that saw right down to my soul. That told me he *sees* me, and he's furious about it.

Oh, god. How did I get into this mess?

Ruthie. Screwing my eyes shut, I force myself to picture my sister back at home in our apartment, knitting baby hats and wiping her eyes when she thinks I'm not looking. We have the same blonde hair but hers is longer, always braided to one side. Now that I know about her bump, it's impossible to miss, even with her baggy sweaters.

That's how I got here, and it's why I'll keep leaking information to the Governor. Because what's my alternative?

Besides, it's not like these are good people, you know?

They're murderers. Criminals. Hell, the man with the scar, Diego Cedrone—he *oozes* violence. He bristles with it, and I shouldn't feel guilty.

So why do I feel so small and gross? Like a creepy little cockroach, sneaking around the mansion and listening at doors.

They're bad people. Bad people.

Bleurgh.

“Holly, you'll take the east wing today. Leave Dr Ossani's quarters, but clean the rest.”

I nod, huddled in the kitchens with the rest of the staff. The head housekeeper keeps talking, doling out tasks, and I focus on breathing slowly, tamping down the constant anxiety that bubbles in my chest these days.

I'm not a good liar. Not a good sneak. Governor Edwards may not realize or care, but he's picked the absolute worst person to blackmail into doing his dirty work. I mean, I didn't even spot that stupid ladder, did I?

Will De Rossi kill me quickly when he finds out I'm the spy? Or will he drag it out and make me suffer? Will his enforcer be the one to do it?

Stainless steel pots and pans glitter on the wall above the huge ovens. I sway in my sensible black shoes, feeling woozy.

It's so hot in here. Must be a kitchen thing, the air always choked with steam and the scent of herbs, because everyone's cheeks are flushed and my hair is damp against the back of my neck. I'll sweat through my maid's uniform soon if they don't hurry this meeting along.

“No opening drawers. No lingering in doorways.”

It's the same spiel we get every day now; the same unspoken warning that if we're suspected as the spy, life won't be worth living anymore.

I shift my weight from foot to foot, hands clasped tightly behind my back.

“Mr Cedrone will interview you all today. As soon as he's finished, return immediately to your duties and do not repeat a word that was said.”

There's a flurry of nods, everyone wide-eyed and suddenly ashen, never mind the heat.

No one wants to speak to De Rossi's enforcer if they can help it. We all know the stories, all know what he's capable of, but who are we to refuse? I clench my fingers together, my chest so tight with anxiety that it could burst.

The way he stared at me last night in the library...

Cedrone already suspects me, I know it.

* * *

I'm pulled away from the laundry room in the early evening, with barely thirty minutes left of my shift. It's been a long,

tense day of waiting for the tap on my shoulder, twisting myself into tighter and tighter knots as I clean, the nerves building the longer I work.

Now I've finally been summoned, and the windows are dark as I hurry along the mansion corridors to the allotted room. Snowflakes spiral past the glass, whipped away on the breeze.

I shiver.

Did he leave me until last on purpose? To make me squirm?

Did anyone else give my name? Do the other staff suspect me?

Oh, god. I'm getting an ulcer, I know I am.

The door creaks as I push it open, heavy wood swinging on its hinges. The room is dark, lit only by a single table lamp, and there are two armchairs facing one another in the center of the floor.

What *is* this room? There are some bookshelves and a drinks cart, plus a dartboard on the wall between two faded oil paintings of fruit, but it seems unused. The air is stale.

The door clicks shut behind me. I jump, spinning around to find Diego Cedrone watching me with those dark eyes.

"Oh." I smooth down my crisp, white apron with trembling fingers. "Hello again."

Cedrone nods at the armchairs. "Take a seat."

He's not a calming presence, not even after a month to get used to him. There's nothing reassuring about this man. With his scars and his beard and the brawny shoulders straining his black shirt, meeting him is like being tossed into a bear enclosure. Even when he throws himself down in the seat opposite mine, gusting out a sigh, there's something tense about him. Something ready to strike.

"Holly."

I nod, the ends of my hair swinging against my cheeks.

"You're new," Cedrone says, scratching his jaw, kicking one ankle up to rest on his knee. He's not reading from any staff file—just watching me from beneath lowered brows, sprawled and powerful. Everyone says that De Rossi's right hand men are all the same age, that they grew up together, but to my eyes, the enforcer looks years older. There are threads of silver at his temples that the others don't have.

Maybe it's hard living. All that violence and blood, adding to the lines around his eyes. Or maybe he doesn't handle stress as well as the others.

I can relate.

"Why did you become a maid, Holly?" he asks.

And even though it's insane, even though I should be tiptoeing around this man, my eyebrow ticks up. "I guess I just love to clean, sir."

I mean, what a question.

His mouth twitches beneath the beard, and for a crazy moment our eyes meet and hold. Sparks crackle through my whole body, simmering in my blood, and I'm clenching my knees together, suddenly breathless.

Why am I sassing the enforcer? Why do I feel so giddy? And why do I want nothing more than to crawl into his lap, settling my weight on those strong thighs? Gah.

Talk about no self preservation instincts. But the thing is, the enforcer and I... we've been orbiting each other for weeks. Always glancing up in time to catch the other's eye, always hyper aware of each other's presence. When he walks into a room, the nerves tingle under my skin—and whenever I meet his gaze head on, a muscle leaps in his bearded jaw.

I *know* him. I feel him on a level that I don't feel other people, and I know he feels me too.

Okay, that sounds nuts. So maybe I am just losing my mind from constant stress.

Cedrone tilts his head, watching me without blinking. In the lamplight, his eyes look almost black, but I know better. When he stared at me in the library last night, I saw the tawny flecks in his eyes and the mahogany rings around his pupils. He's got beautiful eyes—brown but so much warmer than the Governor's.

“You ever heard of Governor Edwards, Holly?”

Speak of the devil. Or think, anyway. I press my damp palms against my apron and say, “Yes. He's famous. Well,

famous for a politician, anyway.”

All true so far. Cedrone grunts, and the armchair creaks as he gets more comfortable. He’s *lazing*, showing off how strong and at ease he is, and it’s so messed up that it makes my belly tighten.

Those thighs really are big, even disguised by his fancy clothes. And those *hands*. They’re like dinner plates. Is he huge all over?

Oh my god. What is wrong with me?

Here I am getting questioned by a man who’d wring my neck without a second thought, and all I can think is that I’d like to perch on his shoulder like a canary. Must be the nerves, making me hysterical.

“I didn’t vote for him,” I say. Maybe I can get through this by guiding the conversation, sticking only to the truth. “Governor Edwards gives me the creeps.”

“He gives you the creeps through a TV screen?”

Shoot. “Yes?” But I don’t sound sure. “Why are you asking about him?”

Do they know already? Am I a dead woman?

Cedrone shrugs, and it’s like an earthquake of muscle and bone. Tectonic plates shifting under the fabric of his black button-down, and all I want to do is cling to his bulk and weep.

Because I've been dreading this all day. *Interrogation* is such a horrible word, but it's the one that everyone hissed under their breath in the kitchens. Makes me think of thumbscrews and fingernails being pulled out; groaning bodies hanging from chains in a damp stone basement. Drains in the center of tiled floors.

Does De Rossi have a torture chamber? I would not be surprised.

But Cedrone watches me, his expression neutral. The lamplight makes his tan face look golden, softening his scar, and I catch myself leaning forward like a flower tracking the sun. Desperate for an ounce of this man's warmth, even it means getting singed.

He watches me shifting closer then sighs.

"I don't enjoy this, you know," he says quietly. Almost like he's talking to himself. "I don't enjoy scaring women. Doesn't sit right with me."

"But you enjoy scaring the men?"

Cedrone's gaze is level. "Sometimes."

My mouth twitches, even though what he said really wasn't funny. "I bet you're good at it."

"You bet right. You see this?" He taps the ragged scar on his cheek. Jeez, the blade must've come so close to his eye. "Looking like an ugly motherfucker comes in handy sometimes. It's easy for people to believe I'm an animal,

Holly, and they're right to think that. They know instinctively what I'm capable of."

My tongue gets stuck in my throat as I swallow. He's threatening me. Why does that hurt so badly? I cough, then say: "I don't think you're ugly. Mean-looking, maybe, but not ugly."

Cedrone huffs and leans back.

And what am I doing, trying to butter up the mobster? Sure, I meant every word, but that won't save me now. The truth is my only hope.

Selective truths.

"I'd have to be the biggest fool alive to spy on Mr De Rossi," I tell him, cutting to the chase as I crinkle my maid dress in damp fists. Cedrone can see that I'm nervous, but who cares? Only an idiot wouldn't be scared of this man. "I can't think of a worse idea. If I did that and got caught, I'd deserve everything that was coming to me—and I'd hate every second. I'd be the worst mole ever."

The enforcer grunts, watching me closely. Trying to sniff out the tiniest lie, but he won't find one here.

I push on, desperation making me chatty.

"One time, when we were teenagers, everyone in the neighborhood threw a surprise party for my sister Ruth, but they didn't tell me even though I'd have helped them out with it. Baked her a cake and found a good location and all that. I'd

have been super helpful, but they knew I can't lie to save my life."

"Never?" the enforcer asks, dark eyes gleaming in the lamplight.

"Nope." Lord help me, it's true.

"Then tell me something, Holly. Are you afraid of me?"

Uh, *duh*. Diego Cedrone is a brutal mafia enforcer with blood on his hands. He could pick his teeth with my bones, and we both know it. There is only one correct answer here, but somehow, those aren't the words that come out.

"S-sometimes," I say.

If he stares at me any harder, he'll forget how to blink. "Only sometimes?"

"Um. Yes. Like—like right now, when you're questioning me and threatening me and scowling like that... yes. You're obviously very scary. I'm not an idiot. But other times..." I chew on my bottom lip, my belly squirming with nerves. "Other times you seem... nice."

"Nice," Cedrone repeats flatly. Does he always fill the room like this? Does he always take up all the air?

"Safe," I say. "Like last night, when you helped me with the ladder. The other men here, I keep my distance and try to avoid their eyes. But with you, it's different, and I have this daydream of us where we're—"

Aaah!

I break off, face hot with embarrassment, and make a mental note to drown myself in whatever cheap alcohol I can find the second I get home to Ruth. *If* I get home.

I've been stressed for too long. I've finally snapped.

And it's this stale, warm room, and the overwhelming presence of this man. His spicy scent and the constant threat of death. It's all short-circuiting my brain and making me hazy, too ready to blurt out my secrets; too ready to do anything he says.

I can't believe I said that.

"Tell me," Cedrone commands, and his chair groans as he shoves to his feet. The enforcer prowls to the far corner of the room, raking a hand through his dark hair, then strides back. He stops right in front of me, looming over me with his face in shadow. "Finish your sentence, Holly."

His voice is so deep. I can *feel* it rumbling through me.

"I'm... we're..."

Am I really going to do this? Really going to blurt out my pathetic daydreams to my lethal crush? It's so humiliating, so desperate, and yet a tiny, mercenary voice in my brain whispers that maybe this confession will mean that when the time comes, my death will be quick. And isn't it better to talk about *this* than about the mole?

It's not like I'm lying. I really do think about this sometimes, especially when I'm bored dusting all the sculptures.

“Holly, I am not a patient man.”

No kidding. The enforcer’s practically vibrating with tension, a tendon standing taut in his neck. My shoulders ache from peering up at him.

“It’s this daydream where... it’s dumb.” I shake my head, and god, even if this story saves my life, I can’t confess it. “Please don’t make me say this.”

Cedrone’s knees crack as he crouches in front of my chair, gripping both arms. The lamplight washes over his face again, and I can see his eyes. The tawny flecks; the warm mahogany rings. He’s sort of beautiful once you look past the scars.

“Tell me,” he orders, voice gruff.

Gah.

“We’re in your suite,” I say in a rush, like if I get this out quickly, it’ll be less embarrassing. I’d prefer the thumbscrews at this point. “Out on the big stone balcony. You’ve dragged the leather armchair out there, and we’re sitting in it together, covered in blankets and watching the snow fall. Feeling it melt against our cheeks.”

Cedrone shakes his head slightly. He looks baffled. “You daydream about that? Sitting in a chair with me?”

“Sitting *on* you in a chair. With your arms around me, and —”

I cut off, because I *really* can’t say the rest. The other things I imagine.

The enforcer's hard chest behind me, heaving with ragged breaths as he pulls the blankets aside. His scarred hand with its swollen knuckles, delving into the layers of fabric, seeking out my bare skin. His deep voice rumbling in my ear, his hot breath against my throat, saying: *"Is this all for me?"*

The room is pin-drop silent. I can hear the rush of blood through my own veins.

"And?" the mobster urges.

"And that's all! Just you and me. In that chair." My stomach hurts from all these nerves, and I've creased this apron beyond all hope of rescue. "I told you it was dumb, Mr Cedrone."

"Diego," he mutters, pushing to his feet. The room seems colder when he walks away. He scrubs a hand over his bearded jaw, watching me from beneath those thick eyebrows, and the pause stretches on until I've forgotten how to breathe. Then: "Run along now, Holly. And if you see anyone acting strangely..."

"I'll tell you, I swear."

So I'd better not look in any mirrors, I guess. The mobster turns away as I hurry for the door. He doesn't wish me goodnight, and I don't say another word either.

As my feet fly down the corridor, I'm lucky to be alive.

Even if I'm dying of embarrassment.

Four

Diego



“**A**nything?”

The next morning, the boss summons me to his study. It’s barely eight, but Santo’s clearly been up for hours already, with an empty coffee mug by his elbow and dark shadows under his eyes. Though he’s at home in his own mansion with nothing but his own people around, he’s still dressed in a crimson waistcoat and shirtsleeves. Does he sleep in evening wear? Does he sleep at all?

“I’ve narrowed it down,” I say.

The balcony door is open, the frosty morning breeze gusting through. It ruffles the papers on the desk and pierces through my clothes, goosebumps rippling across my bare forearms.

Shoving my hands deep in my pockets, I stroll to the bookshelves against the far wall. There are books in almost every room in the De Rossi mansion, and the ones in here are on every possible topic from history and economics to law and

botany—though whatever order he’s got them in makes sense in Santo’s brain and Santo’s alone.

“I want names.”

Of course he does.

“The Merlotti kid.” He’s young, barely a foot soldier, but he’s developed a taste for gambling. A hobby like that’ll go south real fast.

The boss nods, lining up the pens on his desk to perfect parallel lines. “And?”

“Carlotta, the laundry lady? She’s got debts. Medical.”

Santo’s mouth twists, but he says nothing. Stares into the middle distance, waiting for me to go on.

He wants to know if I’ll say it—if I’ll say Holly’s name. Nothing gets past our boss, and he knows that I’m sweet on her; in fact, he doesn’t care about the other names at all, because this is a test.

Really wish Santo would stop testing us all the fucking time.

“And Holly,” I grind out, hating myself and Santo and even her a little bit. This whole situation is so messed up. “The new maid. She’s... slippery. Kept changing the subject when I questioned her.”

Changed it to the one topic with the power to distract me. Played me like a beat-up old fiddle. That little picture she painted of the two of us, curled up together in a snowy

wonderland? I couldn't sleep last night, I fixated on it so badly.

Not that I'm sour about it.

"Any of them have ties to the Governor?" I ask, because of course Santo will have already thought of this. He's always three steps ahead.

"We're looking into it. It won't take long." The boss rolls his stiff neck, but there's a pleased smile tugging at his mouth. The sort of smile that sets off alarm bells ringing in your head. "And we've leaked different secrets to each staff member. Held conversations where they could overhear, so one way or another, they'll reveal themselves soon enough. We've got the spy, Diego, I can feel it."

If Santo squeezes that fountain pen any harder, he'll have an ink explosion on his fancy clothes.

"And then what?" I ask, throat dry.

I've never asked that question before. Never much cared about the fate of Santo's enemies, beyond how much it cost me in dry cleaning.

Holly's different. Maybe that was the whole point of her daydream confession, but in any case, it worked. I don't want her in pain.

But... maybe it's not her. Maybe it's Carlotta or the Merlotti boy, and Holly's just a sweet little thing who blushes when I get near. Who crinkles her maid outfit when she gets

nervous. Who wants me closer, and who might let me steal a taste.

Fuck. I need to get her alone again.

“Then I’ll remind everyone of who I am.” The boss’s tone is almost pleasant, his hand steady as it draws a file across his desk. “That will be all.”

My footsteps to the door are muffled by a thick Turkish rug.

I leave Santo alone in the frozen air. Just how he likes it.

* * *

As evening falls, a few rounds with Nico in the boxing ring get my head on straight. Heavy bags hang from chains all around the edges of the basement, all available for me to pound out my frustrations, but there’s nothing like wiping the smirk off Falasca’s face to put me in a better mood. By the time we’re unwrapping our hands, breathing hard together over by the bench, I’m practically whistling.

“Jesus.” Nico prods at his jaw, glaring at me out of the corner of his eye. “I think you knocked a tooth loose.”

I shrug, happy as a clam. “Shoulda ducked.”

It’s been a long day. Hell, a long *month*, and December’s only half done. Hit men and spies; shoot outs and rushed weddings. It’s like living in a goddamn soap opera around here.

There have been lots of changes lately. I miss simpler times.

Nico's voice bounces off the concrete, even as he speaks quietly. "Santo says he knows. Says he's already sure, but waiting on some final details."

I sniff and take a long drink of water. It's not over until we're one hundred percent sure.

But Nico's watching me, eyes weirdly bright. "He says it's your favorite maid. How about that, huh?"

My grip tightens on the water bottle, denting five fingerprints into the metal. I lower it and swallow. "We don't know until we know."

And suddenly, I don't want to be here anymore. My good mood has fled, and I'm back to sour and stressed and so damn worried about Holly. Will he order me to kill her? How did she get herself in this mess?

Does she hate us? Is that it? Lord knows we've made plenty of enemies over the years; turned plenty of souls against us. Maybe Holly got caught up in old drama, and now she's taking her revenge. It wouldn't be the first time angry ghosts have come back to haunt the De Rossis, and it won't be the last.

"You want me to handle her if Santo's right?" Nico says it lightly, but he's squinting at the far wall. It's a kind offer, such as it is, especially since I just loosened his tooth. He'd go easy on her, that's what he's saying, and he'd spare me the

nightmare of doing it myself. Seems that every fucker in this building knows I'm far gone for Holly.

“No.” I flex my throbbing fingers. “I'll do it.”

Don't want anyone else laying a single finger on her. Don't want them within half a mile of that maid.

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Five

Holly



Diego finds me on the top floor of the mansion, pushing a vacuum along the cream carpet of a guest suite in neat rows. Like a farmer tilling her fields or something.

I dunno. Cleaning gets pretty boring.

He watches me from the doorway, dark eyes glittering. I chew on my bottom lip and keep vacuuming, pretending I don't see.

Then: "We're doing this right now." His gruff voice makes my insides fizz to life. "Tonight, okay? Shut that off."

"I'm busy," I say, just to be contrary, but even as the words come out, I toe the vacuum off and turn to face him. As if I could keep away.

The mobster nods at the glass balcony doors. "Will it work up here?"

Um. What?

He huffs at my bemused expression. "The daydream you told me about yesterday. The armchair in the snow. Will it

work up here, or does it have to be in my suite?"

I blink at the brawny man in the doorway, my thoughts spinning wild. If I insist it has to be in his rooms, will he take me there? I could see his bed. Take greedy lungfuls of his scent. But what if his suite is off limits and this is my only chance?

"Here's good," I mumble.

Diego marches into the room, crossing my perfectly tiled cream floor with agitated steps. He yanks the balcony door open, a gust of wind fluttering the drapes, then casts around for a suitable armchair.

I point at a chintzy number in the corner. One of De Rossi's vintage rescues.

"Will that fit us?"

"It had better," Diego mutters, striding over and lifting it like it weighs less than a bag of sugar. Muscles bulge and flex under his black button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to display his corded forearms, and oh god, my face is already on fire.

"Blankets?" he calls from outside, the armchair scraping against the stone balcony. I stumble to the ottoman at the foot of the guest bed.

Is this really happening? I pinch my thigh through my maid's dress.

No, I—I think it is.

Oh wow.

I've dreamed about this scenario before, obviously, but in my dreams, there are fewer... logistics. I just blink and find myself in Diego Cedrone's lap, his hands roaming greedily over my body, and then I dive into kissing him like my life depends on it.

Of course, my life may *actually* depend on it, but that's not a fun thought. I push it away.

Even up here, in a guest suite that barely anyone uses, the blankets inside the ottoman are luxurious. The finest taste. They're dark velvets and pale wools, fuzzy and quilted and sleek, and I plunge my hands into the ottoman, relishing the softness against my bare arms.

"What are you doing?" The low voice comes from behind me and I jump, my breath catching.

"Nothing." I pick the top three blankets, scuttling past him for the door.

There is no way I'm going to tell Diego Cedrone, brutal mafia enforcer, that I am a tactile little princess who likes to rub soft things on her skin. Nuh-uh. Not gonna happen.

But what would his beard feel like against my thighs?

Nope. Doesn't matter.

It's dark already, though it's not even that late, and thick clouds block out the stars. Snowflakes spiral on the breeze, whipped against the mansion walls, and down below us, the lawns and hedge maze are caked in white.

Holiday lights glow from the balcony railing, wrapped around the stone. They're out on the trees in the grounds too, twined around the branches.

It's beautiful. Then I glance over at the enforcer and my heart gives a lurch, because *he's* beautiful. Primal and deadly, yet with something vulnerable about the way he looks at me.

"C'mon." Diego sits in the armchair, grimacing when it creaks, then gets the blankets ready. He pats his thigh. "Before you freeze to death in your little maid's dress."

Yessir.

A thin layer of snow crunches under my shoes as I cross to him, heart pounding like I've run ten miles, not walked three steps.

"Um." It's so awkward climbing onto his lap. We've barely spoken before, have hardly exchanged more than loaded glances, and now I'm putting my whole weight on him? Crawling onto him and trying not to knee him in the family jewels? "Is this—?"

"Yeah." Diego shifts me on his lap. He wraps me up in all three blankets, then cradles me against his chest. "Yeah. This is it, right? Like this."

A bubble of manic laughter crowds up my throat, because how the hell should I know? I've never sat on a man before—unless you count Santa's lap at the mall when I was a little girl.

"Holly? What are you giggling about?"

“Well, you have the beard, I guess,” I wheeze, reaching up and petting his furry jaw. “But I can’t picture you sliding down a chimney.”

The enforcer huffs a laugh. “You’re calling me old.”

“No, I—”

“You’re calling *me* old. De Rossi’s vicious henchman; the man with blood on his hands and no soul in his eyes. And now this pesky maid is sassing me, and I oughtta—”

His fingers dig through the blankets, tickling my sides, and I shriek and squirm in his lap, grinning so wide. And I haven’t laughed like this in months, haven’t felt the knot of terror in my chest ease in so long, and he’s perfect.

So perfect. I never imagined he would be like this.

We fall still, both breathing hard, our breath forming white plumes in the night air. Diego’s only in his shirtsleeves, and meanwhile here *I* am bundled up like a fleecy burrito. I pluck at his collar. “Are you cold?”

“No. I run hot.” His dark eyes bore into mine. “Always have.”

Let me test that statement. Diego hisses when my icy fingers slide against his neck, exploring his warm skin, but he doesn’t flinch away. If anything, he presses into my touch.

“Believe me yet?”

“Maybe.” Biting my lip, I flick his shirt button undone. Then another, and another, and I can’t believe my own

freaking daring. Apparently spying on a brutal crime family has turned me wild. “Let me try in here.”

Diego’s big head tips back with a grunt when I slide my hand inside his shirt, smoothing over the muscled planes on his chest. His eyes are half-lidded, watching me, and even in the dark, I can feel the scars on his bare skin.

Chest hair, too. God, he’s so *manly*. I squeeze my thighs together and try to level out my breathing.

“You like what you find, Holly?”

I wet my lips. My voice is hoarse. “Yes.”

“Well, you can touch me wherever you want, baby. Tonight, this scarred old body is all for you.”

Tonight.

Right. I bite my lip and stare at the hollow of his throat. It’s dim out here, but we’re lit by the string lights and the guest suite and the glow of the snow, and I see his throat bob. My fever’s cooling and he knows it. My fire’s been banked by a big dose of harsh reality, because tonight is all we have. Tonight is all we’ll *ever* have.

Diego’s hands tighten on me. One on my waist, one on my thigh, gripping me possessively through the blankets.

“You’re not going in yet,” he warns, his voice gruff. “You’re not running away from me. Don’t be scared of me, Holly. Not yet.”

No, I'm not scared of him—yet. But I will be soon, won't I? And we both know it, so that's what this is about. This dreamy interlude. These stolen moments together out under the snow, where neither Santo De Rossi nor the Governor nor anyone else can reach us.

How long has he known I'm the spy? Has he already told his boss?

And why am I still alive? Why does he want me at all, knowing what he does?

“You've turned to stone in my lap,” Diego mutters. When he speaks, I feel the words rumble through his chest. “Is that all we'll get, then? Ten minutes of teasing, and then it's done?”

I blow out a long breath. And maybe he's asking too much of me, or maybe he's giving me more than I deserve, but I can't tell anymore. Everything's jumbled up. All I know is that I don't want this to be over yet either.

The armchair creaks as I move against him, shuffling around on his hard thighs, rearranging myself so I'm sitting on his legs and facing him head on. His dark eyes gleam as I wind my arms around his neck.

“You don't trust me,” I point out. “So why would you come out here with me all alone?”

Diego's grin is slow and warm. It spreads through me like hot toffee sauce. It makes my toes curl in my sensible shoes.

“Holly. I think I can take you.”

My laugh is pained. “Jerk.”

And then we're meeting in the middle, both lunging forward at the same time, inhaling sharply as our mouths join. *Yes, my brain goes. Finally.*

Don't stop. Don't ever stop.

And his hands are in my hair and I'm yanking on his shirt front, and it's so hot and dark and blurry. He tastes like peppermint and brandy, and his beard scrapes against my cheeks, and he really is burning hot.

My heart is so raw.

I'm frowning into our kiss, slanting our mouths together harder, and my world tilts on to its side. I'm surprised the mansion doesn't topple over; surprised trees wrapped in holiday lights don't fly past our balcony.

Surely the earth just moved for everyone. Right?

Diego's tongue swipes along the seam of my mouth, knockin' on the door. I let him in, groaning. Of course I do.

Because this man could ask me for anything tonight, and I'd give it. He could touch the parts of me that no one has ever touched before; he could plunder my body like the merciless criminal he is. I don't care. I want it all.

And as he kisses me back, harsh and desperate, all I can think is: *I'm sorry*. Over and over I think it, with each frantic beat of my heart.

Sorry that I'm lying to him.

Sorry that I'm such a crappy spy.

Sorry that tonight is all we'll have.

And sorry that whatever happens to me, he'll have to be the one to do it. It's nuts, but my heart breaks for him just thinking about that, because hurting me? It will destroy Diego Cedrone. I know it down to my soul.

"Don't come back tomorrow," Diego grates out, pressing whiskery kisses along my throat. "Don't come back, you hear? You stay away where it's safe."

Safe from him, maybe.

But not safe from Governor Edwards, nor from De Rossi. The mob boss won't let me spy on him then quit and Diego knows it, even if he's fooling himself right now. I'm screwed. There's nowhere on this earth that I could run to get far enough away—and besides, what would happen to Ruthie and the baby?

I made a deal with Governor Edwards. My only hope is seeing it through, and maybe, just maybe, he'll take care of her like he promised once I'm gone.

"Holly?" The mobster gives me a little shake, then sucks a bruise on my neck. He's marking me, but I don't care, because if I'm going down tomorrow, I want to be wearing the proof of tonight. A bittersweet memento. "Are you listening to me? You stay away from now on. You don't come back, and you run. Okay? You run far."

I pet his bearded cheek. "Okay," I lie.

His deep sigh is pure relief. And what would it cost him if I did what he said? Would he take my place, drawing De Rossi's rage?

He's such a good man.

Well. With me, anyway.

"It's nice out here, right?" I jerk my chin up at the snowflakes tumbling all around. "I know it was a weird daydream, but it's pretty good when you're in it."

"The best," Diego says, and his throat sounds like it's been scraped raw.

An icy breeze sweeps over our balcony and I shiver, burying my face in his warm throat. His arms wrap around me, holding tight.

One kiss will never be enough, but this is all we have.

And he's right. It's the best.

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Six

Diego



The next morning, Santo finds me out on the grounds, doing a lap of the compound through the snow. Usually, I'd leave grunt work like this to the security team, but with prices on all our heads and one gunfight already this month, I'm not taking any chances.

Besides, I can't sit still. Not today.

"I've already doubled up patrols," the boss says, falling into step by my side. He's wearing a long, dark coat, hands tucked in the pockets, and his pale cheeks are pink from the cold.

"Just making sure." I walk faster, but he matches me easily. The bastard's not even breathing hard, despite the knee-deep drifts of snow.

"There are more cameras, too." He points one black leather glove at the nearest tree, where a red light glows between the branches. It might be obvious, except for the string lights wrapped around the tree, camouflaging the camera's watchful eye.

Hiding something vicious under the holiday cheer.

Typical Santo.

“Any news?” I ask.

The boss hums, non-committal, and anger flashes through me, hot and bitter. Though I’ve been loyal to him my whole life, though we grew up together, there’s a part of me right now that wants to snap Santo’s neck and bury him in the nearest snowbank.

I could do it, probably. He’s faster than me, but I’m heavier.

And it’d be signing my own death warrant, especially with these cameras all around, but maybe Holly could get away. Maybe they’d forget all about her after my betrayal.

“Don’t do anything reckless, Diego.” Santo speaks softly, our steps crunching through the snow. It’s as though he can read my mind, and he knows exactly how tempted I am, and if anything, it amuses him. “I know you’re fond of the maid—”

“Holly,” I interrupt. The least this asshole could do is say her name. “Her name is Holly, and I’m not fucking *fond* of her. That’s like saying the Sahara Desert is a bit warm.”

Santo sighs, like I’m being ridiculous. All these pesky feelings are so tiresome to him.

When he stops walking, I grind to a halt too. Old habits die hard, and I’ve been Santo De Rossi’s attack dog for most of my life. We both stare at the mansion, squinting against the cold wind, coat collars flapping.

“There’s something I want to show you,” Santo says at last.

My gut sinks all the way down to bedrock.

* * *

They’ve got her in a concrete room in the basement—the one with a drain in the floor. Holly’s tied to a chair, her wrists and ankles wrapped with duct tape, and her black maid’s dress is rumpled.

Her head hangs low, and her breathing is shallow. Have they hurt her already? I’ll burn this whole fucking mansion to the ground if they have.

“We spoke to the PI.” Santo follows me into the room, in shirtsleeves and a forest green waistcoat now. He nods at a paper file on a table near the wall. “Got some background on her. But I thought you might like to do the honors.”

Like to? I’d rather jump off the roof. But if it means no one else touches her...

“You’re sure, then?”

Holly’s blonde hair hangs across her cheeks, and she looks so tiny in that chair. I scan her bare limbs for cuts and bruises, my heart hammering, because the little maid can hear every word we’re saying crystal clear, but she doesn’t look up. She’s defeated.

I hate this so much.

“Yes.” Santo leans against the back wall, folding his arms and watching her. “We found ties to the Governor, and our warehouse in the garment district got raided last night. That’s the piece of information we fed her.”

Twice damned. Ah, Christ.

Well, Santo never does anything by half measures. If he was gonna catch my girl in a lie, he was gonna do it thoroughly.

“I want to know why she did it.” The boss inspects one thumbnail, looking bored. “I want to know the exact information she passed along. All of it.”

So far, so obvious.

“And then I want her cooperation with a special task.”

My gut twists. “But we can’t trust her,” I say, desperate to spare her from whatever this is—and over in her chair, Holly’s shoulders droop another inch. But I’ve hurt her for no reason, because Santo shrugs, unfazed.

“We don’t need to trust her for this.”

One minute later, Holly and I are alone in the cold, concrete room. How is it drafty without any goddamn windows? I cross to her, throat tight, and crouch in front of her chair. The drain beside my knee is dark, and I try not to look at it.

“Baby.” She’s sniffing, lips pressed together in a tight line. Trying not to cry. “Did anyone hurt you? Are you hurt?”

There's an agonizing pause, but then Holly jerks her chin from side to side.

No, they haven't hurt her. Fine. Everyone in this compound can live a few minutes longer.

"You need to tell me everything," I say urgently, checking her fingertips for circulation. Did they wrap the duct tape too tight? "Just tell me everything and we'll go from there. You don't need to protect the Governor, do you? Not that old asshole? So whatever bind you're in, you just tell me all about it and I'll fix it for you. Okay?"

Between the ends of her hair, Holly's chin wobbles. "S-so nice to me," she whispers.

Nice to her? *Nice?*

No one has ever called me nice in my whole goddamn life—no one except this girl. But she's already sucking in a shaky breath; already raising her chin. Her eyes swim with tears, but she spills it all in one garbled rush.

Her employer, the Governor.

His threats against her sister.

The baby.

"W-we've been making baby clothes," she hiccups, crying outright now, wild eyes bouncing around all the walls. "But if he sends Ruth to prison—please, you have to help her—"

"I will." It's the easiest promise I've ever made, whatever it might cost me. My palms stroke up and down her arms. "I'll

take care of Ruth, I promise. And I'll take care of *you*."

Her laugh is strangled. "After I complete De Rossi's task."

Dread twists in my gut. And my mind's already whirring, trying to figure a way out of this for her, but Holly straightens suddenly and looks me dead in the eye.

"Forget it. I want to do whatever it is. I bet it's spying on the Governor, right? Turning double agent?" Her jaw firms at my shrug, because yeah, it's probably that. It's the only thing Holly can offer the boss at this point. "Then I'm happy to do it. I *want* that horrible old creep to pay for what he's done to me. But..."

Her courage drains away as fast as it came, and Holly's smile is wobbly.

"I'm still a terrible spy."

Ah, shit. I rub my chest, and I'm so fucking worried about her. Is this what love feels like? Watching your heart wander around outside your body, getting into scrape after scrape?

"You need to tell me everything you passed along. Everything, baby."

She nods. "It's all on a burner phone on the top floor. I hid it in one of those fancy vases in the alcoves."

I breathe out a laugh. "Smart."

And that should be it, but there's one more thing I can't help asking. One more thing eating away at my insides. "Why

didn't you come to me with this, Holly? Why didn't you confess? I could've helped you weeks ago."

Her gaze shutters, dropping away to the floor, and already I wish I hadn't asked. "I wasn't sure."

"Whether I'd help you?" My words have turned harsh, but I can't help it. I'm wound too tight, my insides knotted with fear, and this room is somehow cold and stuffy at the same time. And my knees ache against the concrete and that drain keeps drawing my eye and that duct tape's cutting into her wrists and I hate this.

Hate all of it.

"We have a connection." So why do I sound so angry about it? "I know you feel it too. You could have come to me anytime."

"We barely spoke before yesterday!" Her chin's up again, eyes flashing, and even as my insides lurch, it's a relief to see her fighting back. Holly grips the arms of her chair, glaring at me as she yells: "You're a mobster, Diego! I'd be the world's biggest idiot to spill everything to you just because I have a crush!"

Well. Yeah. Okay, maybe.

"But I'd have kept you safe," I insist.

"I know that *now*." Holly rolls her eyes, glaring at the ceiling. "God. You are such a..."

I wait, our yelled words still bouncing off the concrete walls. Nothing.

“Such a...?”

The maid’s eyes narrow on me. “Such a doofus.”

My cheeks ache when I grin. “A doofus? Jesus, Holly. Hold something back.”

Cold seeps through the floor into my knees as I lean forward. I go eighty percent of the way, and I wait for her there. Not gonna kiss her by force while she’s tied to a goddamn chair, that’s for sure.

But my girl puffs out a little breath, and then she’s craning forward too, chair creaking. Her hair tickles my cheeks as she kisses me, soft and slow and sweet.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers against my mouth.

“Don’t be,” I tell her, and my words are gruff but my hands on her arms are gentle. My chest aches like a motherfucker, though. “Not like any of this is your fault.”

I kiss her again, stealing some of that sweetness. That warmth. Her lips part against mine with a sigh.

And we’re alone—for now. In this room that doesn’t lock, where every sound echoes off the walls, and it’s the worst possible timing but I can’t help kissing her again. And again. And again. I kiss her until heat crackles through my veins, my heart drumming against my ribs, and every part of the outside world is hazy.

“Your wrists—” I start to say, breaking away and breathing hard, but Holly shakes her head and strains against the chair to reach me again.

“Leave them.”

Her muffled moan when our mouths slant together—that’s my new favorite sound. Holly’s hands clench and flex, tied helplessly to the chair, but I know from last night that she’d be touching me everywhere right now if she could. Tugging on my hair and slipping those cool hands inside my shirt, mapping my chest with greedy little sounds. Petting my beard and grabbing my shoulders for balance.

But she can’t. She’s at my mercy.

“You know, there’s something about having you tied up, Holly. In other circumstances, I’ve gotta say...”

She laughs, shaking her head, but her cheeks flush a darker pink. Interesting.

I lean in, pressing the words against her fevered throat, and she shivers under my hot breath. “I think you like it too. Maybe you’ve even thought about this before. Shall we test my theory?”

Holly’s breath catches... and then she nods once, quick and sure.

I fucking knew it.

Throwing a glance over my shoulder at the closed door, I slide both hands up her thighs. Up, up, under her maid’s dress, her bare skin so warm and soft, and in an ideal world I’d drag this out—but we don’t have much time.

Already, I’m crawling out of my skin with how badly I need her. And Santo could come back at any second.

The boss would not be amused, but it'd be easier to hold back the ocean than to stop this now.

“You're gonna cry out for me, Holly.” I'm kneading her thigh muscles, sucking harsh kisses down her throat. She's so small and soft and perfect. “Those are the only screams you'll ever make in this room, but it going to be quick, okay? Quick and rough, just this once.”

“O-okay.” She's nodding again, flushed and bright-eyed. Her knees inch farther apart—as far as the chair will allow. “Okay, hurry then. Touch me.”

My thumbs dip to her center, and god. Her panties are soaked. We've only exchanged a few kisses and some heated words, and she's already wound so tight she's panting, hands tied so she can't ease her own ache.

My shaft swells behind my fly, thick and urgent. I ignore it, and Holly's hips shift as I rub her through the cotton, her back arching. Two hard points dig into her dress, and I spare one hand to tease her nipples, then twist and pinch.

She hisses through her teeth. Her head lolls, eyelids fluttering.

So goddamn responsive.

My thumb rubs her through the fabric.

“You said quick and rough,” Holly huffs, hips twitching up again. “Quick and rough, Mr Cedrone. And now you're teasing.”

“So impatient,” I mutter, but she’s right. We don’t have time, and I grip the crotch of her panties in my fist, then tear it out in one go. She yelps, fabric ripping and chair shrieking against the concrete, but then my fingers are on her, petting and soothing. Sliding through her wetness, coasting between her folds.

What I wouldn’t give to rub my length along that.

“You’re soaked, baby. Can you hear how wet you are?” We both pause, breathing hard, and the only other sounds are the slick little noises between her legs and the echo of her shout still fading away. Holly whimpers. “That’s the sound of a needy girl. One who needs her man’s fingers inside her. Don’t you think?”

“Yessss,” she hisses, trailing off when I lean forward again and mouth at her jaw. There’s no flair to the way I kiss her; nothing but scraping teeth and the rasp of my beard and my tongue lashing greedily over the salt-sweet taste of her skin. I could swallow this girl whole. “*Oh.*”

My thumb finds her clit beneath the dress, and I’m flying blind but it doesn’t matter. She’s giving me all the direction I need, choking out those little moans and gasps and wriggling in the chair, her body betraying every single thing that feels good.

She feels good. Like a goddamn miracle.

And I can’t believe she wants this, after everything. Can’t believe she wants *me*, but the scars and calluses on my hands

don't seem to put her off. If anything, she bucks against them, moaning louder.

"The boss will hear you," I warn, pressing one fingertip inside her.

Holly laughs, burying her face in the crook of my neck. "I don't care. We'll tell him you whipped out the thumbscrews."

I'm close to whipping out something, alright, but thumbscrews ain't it. "Santo won't believe that."

"I don't care," she pants. "I don't care."

And she's close already, I can feel it. Body tensed and pulse thrumming faster in her throat, and it's definitely quick but I promised her rough, too, didn't I?

Jaw hard, I shove my finger deep inside her, her channel so snug and hot around my knuckles. She's... new to this. Fuck.

But there's no turning back, and it's not like I'll let her go after this. Won't let her go back to her normal life and date around before she settles down with some other asshole. Holly is *mine*.

So I'm glad she's new to this. Just the thought of her with another man makes my head pound, and I bare my teeth as my finger saws in and out of her.

And the lack of experience hasn't stopped Holly from groaning, hips rising and falling as she tries to hump my hand. Hasn't stopped her from sucking bruises on my throat, claiming me like I claimed her, her breath coming in hot puffs against my skin. She's a little wildcat.

“Diego,” she says, her voice kinda slurred. “*Please.*”

I smirk at the far wall, then add a second finger. And with my thumb on her clit and two thick fingers inside her, Holly stiffens up in her chair, gripping the arms until the metal creaks.

I graze a fingertip over the pucker of her ass. Just the tiniest touch.

“Oh my *god.*” My maid jerks and thrashes in her chair, wailing loud enough to bring down the mansion, her cheeks red hot. She comes and comes and comes, body pulsing around my fingers, and the thought of my length wedged in there instead—it makes my throat dry.

The thud of footsteps is our only warning. I draw my fingers out and tug her dress down, moving to block her from view as the door slams open.

Santo glares down at me, lip curled in disgust. “For fuck’s sake.”

Seven

Holly



Turns out De Rossi doesn't just want me to turn on the Governor. He wants a private tour around the politician's mansion, and he wants it tonight.

"Are you sure?" I squeak, swaying on the back seat of one of his fancy cars hours later as we're swept through the dark countryside. Diego's wedged right beside me, his thigh flush against mine, and the mob boss watches us coolly from the seat opposite.

I'm in my gray maid's uniform. The one from my job before.

Feels like a thousand years ago.

"This is so risky," I say, pleading with De Rossi to believe me. "Governor Edwards has tons of security, and if anyone recognizes you—"

"No one will recognize me."

"But if they *do*, his security detail are all armed—"

“Governor Edwards has a private function this evening.” De Rossi smiles, and my heart beats faster, but not like how it does for Diego. This must be how little furry rodents feel when they get cornered by a snake. “He’s been hoping for a dinner invitation at the admiral’s home for months, and then tonight he received one out of the blue. His security team will attend as a matter of course. Isn’t that convenient?”

The car lurches around a bend. I feel sick.

“My sister...”

“Is safe and settling into her new room at the compound as we speak.” De Rossi picks an invisible fleck of dust off his fancy suit pants. Even when breaking and entering, he dresses like he’s attending a gala. Ice blue eyes flick up to me as he says, “You really don’t have a choice, you know.”

Diego shifts beside me, his mouth turned down behind his beard. He doesn’t like this. Doesn’t like the way I’m risking myself tonight, going back into the lion’s den—or the *other* lion’s den, I suppose. But the mob boss is right: what’s my alternative? Frankly, I’m surprised to still be alive.

If this is the penance De Rossi wants from me, I’ll pay it and be thankful, because something tells me that if Diego weren’t so freaking attached, I wouldn’t be nearly so lucky.

Even if this *is* a terrible idea.

“Well, there will still be the regular security guards. So we should go in through the staff entrance and stick to the service

corridors, and if anyone catches us... we'll need a cover story."

"We'll say I'm your lover. There for an illicit tryst."

I snort, just as Diego bristles beside me, my brawny mobster suddenly puffing up and filling two thirds of the car. An illicit tryst? Who talks like that?

"Fine," I agree, because it's the most believable explanation, even if in reality I much prefer scars and swollen knuckles to fancy waistcoats. "Let's hope we don't get caught then."

De Rossi's mouth flattens as he glances over me. "Indeed."

Diego's still grumbling under his breath when we pull to a stop on a dirt path near Governor Edwards' grounds, our vehicle hidden by thick woodland. It's the closest we can get without using the driveway and drawing attention, and I'm feeling pretty smug that I thought of it.

The night is freezing when we step out into the darkness, doors shutting quietly. I shiver in my maid's dress and blink at the second vehicle idling behind us.

"Why do we need two cars?"

De Rossi sniffs, his features extra sharp in the headlights. "We'll leave separately. The reasons are none of your concern."

Whatever. This is the weirdest night of my life, and we've barely started yet. "Come on, then."

I turn and start trudging in the direction of the mansion, snow crunching underfoot, but a big hand grips my elbow before I make it three steps. Diego spins me around and flattens me to his chest, his breath hot on my ear.

“You’re not his fucking *lover*.”

Hands roam over my back, my ribs, and plunge into my hair. Mapping his territory. I laugh weakly, gripping two handfuls of his shirt. “No kidding.”

“Don’t get caught, baby. I’m serious. I don’t want that shit spoken out loud, not another single time.”

Ah. How to soothe a jealous, bristling mobster? I reach up and pet Diego’s cheeks, his beard soft against my palms. He glowers down at me, dark eyes glittering in the moonlight.

“We won’t get caught.”

He puffs out a breath. “Good.”

“And I’ll be back with you soon, and we’ll pick up where we left off.”

Diego rumbles out a pleased sound, and behind us De Rossi mutters, “Good grief.”

The snow glistens on Governor Edwards’ grounds, white and ghostly, and in the distance, the windows of his mansion burn with light.

“Let’s get this over with,” the mob boss mutters, and tugs me away by the back of my dress.

* * *

We're not the only ones who slip through the staff entrance. Two surly men in suits and earpieces follow us inside, then melt into the darkness with a jerk of De Rossi's chin.

"What are they...?"

"They're running an errand for me. Come on."

Governor Edwards' mansion is dim, cloaked in shadows. Pools of light spread beneath sconces across the rugs and floorboards, but it's not enough to make the rooms feel warm or welcoming. Everything is austere.

"Charming," De Rossi mutters as we pass an oil painting framed on the wall. It's of an old timey town square, with three men standing on the gallows as they wait to hang. "Of course he has terrible art."

And it's funny, because the mob boss seems more offended by the Governor's taste in paintings than by anything else so far. He glares at the scene, his nose wrinkled in distaste.

"At least it's an original?" I whisper, leading him into a side corridor that only the staff use.

De Rossi scoffs quietly. "An original piece of shit. Not everything is worth collecting, you know. Some things aren't worth the canvas they're painted on."

I hum as we slip through the corridors, fighting a smile. Why is this suddenly fun? I'm losing my mind.

Focus, Holly. Focus.

My pulse spikes with each distant thump and rumble of voices, but it's nothing out of the ordinary. Just the normal sounds of the Governor's mansion at night. And when I wheel around a corner and slam to a halt, sucking in a sharp breath, there's nothing but velvet silence behind me.

Guess the mob boss is better at sneaking than I am. Figures.

"Oh! Holly, isn't it?" The night-time housekeeper smiles at me, confused, from where she's marking off some kind of checklist on a clipboard. She's standing to one side in the corridor, but it doesn't matter. Our path is blocked. "I didn't realize they called in extra hands tonight. Did they send you to help with inventory?"

My palms are damp where they press into my hips. "Um," I manage. What are words? What do humans say to each other? "No, I... I mean, maybe I could help you once I'm done with this, but first I need to..."

"No problem." The housekeeper waves a hand, and her smile at me is kind. She turns back to her clipboard. "I shouldn't try to poach other staff. Carry on."

I clear my throat. "Okay."

I hover as she turns to face the wall, engrossed in her work, and weigh our options. I could make an excuse and head back the way we came, then find another route—or we could test our luck, and hope that whatever's on that clipboard is truly fascinating.

Well. Color me crazy, but I'm feeling bolder by the minute. All these mobsters must be a bad influence on me.

"Goodnight!" I chirp, bustling past, and the housekeeper raises a hand without even glancing over. I don't dare turn back, don't falter in my steps, but when I round the next corner, Santo De Rossi is by my side, keeping pace.

"You're like a cat burglar," I breathe. "Or a magician."

The kingpin inhales sharply. "Never," he states, "*ever* say anything like that to me again. I've killed men for much less."

But was Diego in love with those men? I think not, and I'm just starting to realize that my man gives me a certain kind of armor in this world. His protection extends around me, even when he's not here.

I beam at the corridor stretching ahead, and I probably have cartoon hearts floating in my eyes.

"The Governor's study is around that corner. I'll poke my head in first, then you follow. Oh wait, what if it's locked?"

De Rossi's strides quicken, and there's a tinkle of keys. "That will not be a problem."

* * *

In the end, I don't know what I expected. Pigs' blood splashed over the walls and a dagger taken to all the paintings? That was obviously never going to happen, though the mob boss looks sorely tempted on that last point.

Instead, Santo De Rossi is controlled. Almost bored in his perusal. He strolls around the bookshelves, huffing at the titles and the way the spines have never been cracked. He glances at the framed photo of the Governor's son on his wall, and carefully selects the right key on his stolen ring to open the desk drawers.

"Where did you get those?" I ask as the top drawer slides open. We're working in the dark, not willing to attract attention with any light beneath the study door. Instead, De Rossi settles into the leather chair, then scans the Governor's private letters by the light of the moon spilling through the windows.

"I had them cut weeks ago. Be quiet now, please."

I purse my lips and wander to gaze out over the grounds, wrapping my arms around my waist. My stomach hurts.

Even with the Governor gone, this room feels... off. Malevolent. His bad energy clings to the furniture like a foul smell.

"When he called me in here to blackmail me, I thought about braining the old creep with that paperweight."

De Rossi grunts, his black leather gloves whispering over pages and pages of private documents. "You would have saved me a lot of time."

I spin and watch the mob boss examine every single artifact locked away in the Governor's drawers. He's like an

archaeologist, picking over ruins to find something of interest.
“But you’re not going to kill him, are you?”

Because *that* doesn’t fit. All this fuss for the story to end with a stray bullet?

De Rossi’s smile is humorless. He draws a phone out of his pocket and snaps photos of some kind of legal contract. “Not immediately.”

“And tonight is about...”

I trail off, hoping for an answer. And somewhere deep down, De Rossi must be warming to me, because I actually get one.

“Tonight is about saying hello.” The mob boss closes the drawers with a soft *thunk* and locks them all, then pulls an envelope from his pocket.

I squint at the red paper. “A holiday card?”

“‘Tis the season.” De Rossi places the square in the center of the desk. “Do you think he’ll display it?”

Ha. I shake my head, baffled and amused and still kinda thrilled by this little nighttime escapade. “I think he’ll freak the hell out.”

The mobster stands. “Good. Shall we be on our way?”

I wander to the door, then check both ways in the corridor. As we sneak back through the shadowy mansion, something prods at the back of my mind.

“What about those other two men you let in? What about their errand?”

There’s a long pause, and my flash of fear tastes sour.

“Don’t trouble yourself with that,” De Rossi says softly.

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Eight

Diego



I've worn a trench through the snow by the time they get back, pacing up and down between the trees for what feels like hours. A snapping twig is the only sign of their arrival, and I wheel around in time to see Holly and Santo slipping between the ghostly tree trunks, two thieves in the night.

"Did you do it?" I call softly, already striding to meet them. Santo nods just as Holly flings herself into my arms. She's shivering in her thin maid's uniform, her teeth chattering in my ear, and I put her down long enough to shrug off my coat and wrap it around her shoulders.

"The others are following behind," Santo says, strolling to the lead car and popping the trunk. A small electric light glows inside, washing over his sharp features and making his cheeks look gaunt. The air smells like pine. "You should leave before she sees."

"Before I s-see what?" Holly says, the cold slurring her words. She glances between us, her blonde hair almost silver in the moonlight. "Before I see *what*?"

“Come on, baby.” I draw her away by the elbow, leading her through the snow to the second vehicle. “We’ve had the heaters on, getting it good and ready for you.”

“Diego Cedrone, if I’ve been the accessory to a crime, I should know about it!”

Holly’s so easy to lift in a squirming bundle. So easy to deposit in the back seat of the car, her outraged curses ringing in my ears as I belt her in. Gotta go, gotta go.

The car door slams shut. My footsteps crunch through the snow as I round the vehicle.

In the distance, a pair of Santo’s soldiers appear between the trees, one carrying a pale shape slung over his shoulder. Both men are stoic and silent, their suits whispering as they walk.

“Excellent.” Santo straightens as they get near, rapping on the side of the open trunk. “In here, please.”

I shake my head, and my heart sinks down to my belly, because there’s no way my girl hasn’t seen.

Sure enough, Holly’s rolled her window down when I slide into the car, and she’s leaning halfway out to watch the scene in front of us. “Oh my god,” she says, as the pale shape stirs against the man’s shoulder, making dazed noises. “Oh my god! That’s a woman!”

Santo spares us an evil smile. Ass.

“It’s the Governor’s daughter.” I tug Holly back inside as Santo’s captive lands in the trunk with an *oof*. They must have

her bound and gagged. “Don’t worry, he won’t hurt her—the boss doesn’t hurt innocents. He’s just borrowing her for a while.”

The window hums up as I speak, and I jab the button like it might make it go faster. Like it might magically stop Holly from asking questions, and from looking at me with that doubt in her eyes.

Fuck.

“He’s kidnapping her,” she says. It’s a statement, not a question.

“Yes.” I settle back against the leather and nod for the driver to take us away. The car jerks backward, lurching over the uneven snow, and my girl sways in her seat, looking queasy. “This is the mob, Holly. You knew that already.”

“He’s *kidnapping* her. And we’re letting him do it!”

A harsh breath gusts out of me, along with the last of my hope. Because who was I kidding, thinking she’d want to stick around? Thinking that she’d want anything to do with us and our world? With *me*?

Holly is good. She’s innocent and sweet, and when she came on my fingers earlier, she gazed up at me like I’d given her the moon on a platter.

It was too good to be true, and this car is stifflingly hot, the air scented with burning dust from the heaters. Up front, the driver’s partition inches toward the roof, and he’s a smart man because he’s avoiding my eyes. Pretending not to hear this.

“Listen to me.” The leather creaks as I shift to face her head on, my gaze hard even though my insides are knotted with misery. The partition thumps softly against the roof, and then we’re alone, rocking over the snow, leaving Santo and the Governor’s daughter in our exhaust. “Edwards is a prime time fucker. He started this war with Santo out of the blue, and he blackmailed you and threatened Ruth. He’s gotten one of us stabbed and one shot already, and there’s *still* a price on all our heads. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

The breath shudders in and out of my lungs. Holly blinks up at me from the depths of my coat, her eyes so huge, and she’s like one of those little anime things, especially in her maid’s dress. Damn it. Should have known this could never be real.

“The Governor won’t stop until Santo’s ruined and we’re all dead. *Or* until the boss reminds him who he’s dealing with. Which option do you prefer?”

The car lurches around a bend. I spread one palm over the ceiling, determined not to flatten her.

“There’s a price on your head?” Holly mumbles, her fingers hooking onto my shirtsleeve. “Yours too?”

Is that strain in her voice from worry? Or is she still horrified with me?

“He won’t hurt her.” I *need* Holly to get this. “Santo’s a cold motherfucker, but he won’t hurt an innocent woman. She’ll get a nice cushy stay at the mansion for a few weeks, complete with room service and all the movies she can watch,

then once the Governor agrees to our demands, she'll be dropped back on her daddy's doorstep without a scratch on her. I swear it."

Holly's chin wobbles. Her lips press together, and she looks so damn overwhelmed. Well, Jesus, who can blame her? Her life has been nothing but danger and mayhem for weeks, the poor thing.

I risk stroking one fingertip over her cheek, and wait for her to meet my eyes. "I promise," I tell her. "Trust me."

And I will never renege on my promises to this woman. My word has always been gold, but with Holly? I'd rather slit my own throat than lie or disappoint her. I'd rather never speak another word in my life than lead her wrong.

As she stares up at me, eyes flitting between mine, trying desperately to read me—I gaze back, laying myself bare to her. Showing her my whole crooked soul.

What's left of it, anyway.

When Holly finally nods, I'm too wrung out to feel triumphant. I lean back in my seat and stare blindly at the world whipping past outside.

* * *

A soft knock drifts through the pounding of my headache. I scowl at the door to my suite, spinning a glass of whiskey in my hands, my limbs sprawled in the leather armchair that Holly told me once she daydreamed about.

That was so long ago. Decades, it feels like, not days.

“What?” I grunt.

I’m not in the mood to debrief with Santo. Not tonight. Yeah, he’s the boss, but his antics have cost me *everything*—and though I know on some level that it’s not fair to blame him, that I’m a grown man who makes his own choices...

Fuck, I’m just not in the mood.

I tip back my glass, the whiskey burning my throat.

“Um.” A hesitant voice floats through the door. A *female* voice, and Christ knows Allegra and Leah don’t ever tiptoe around or sound unsure. “Diego?”

“Yeah.” I’ve already launched out of my chair, tossing back the last of my drink and flinging the glass at the bed. It hits the covers and rolls onto the rug with a muffled thump, and my legs are like jelly as I lunge for the door. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

When I wrench it open, she’s there. Blonde hair damp and a little darker from a shower, her little body wrapped up in a soft-looking white robe and blue pajama pants.

Holly. My Holly. Something deep inside my chest settles down, purring like a soothed house cat just from having her near.

Does she need something? Is she hungry?

“You can snack whenever you want,” I say, like an idiot. “The kitchens are always open, so take whatever. That goes

for Ruth, too.”

“Um,” Holly says. “Thank you?”

She tilts her head, her expression bemused, and now we’re just standing in this plush corridor together in strained silence. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“So…” I scratch my beard, frowning down at the maid. Because why is she here? Seriously? The way Holly looked at me in the back of that car, you’d think she’d never want to lay eyes on me again. “Did you and Ruth get settled in okay?”

I guess if she needs a pair of hands to lump the furniture around or whatever, I’m game. I only had a few mouthfuls of that whiskey before I threw it at the bed.

So glad no one saw that. What is wrong with me?

“Yes. I mean, it’s way nicer here than our crappy little apartment. The heating works, for a start, and there’s no damp on the walls. So that’s an upgrade, and way better for the baby.”

Holly fiddles with the belt of her robe as she speaks, watching me carefully. I swallow hard and listen, leaning against the door frame, soaking up every word.

Every sentence, every tidbit, every glance from her is precious. And this is all I have now. This is all I’ll ever have.

“Diego?”

I grunt a reply, my temples pounding as I stare down at the love of my life. How long will they stay with us? Will I get to

see her with Ruth's baby? I bet she'll look like an angel when she holds the little mite. Like one of Santo's fancy paintings of goddesses or whatever.

"Are you..." Holly sighs, her shoulders drooping. "Have you changed your mind about me?"

...What?

Have I changed my mind?

Have *I* changed *my* mind?

Jesus Christ.

Holly's slung over my shoulder before her next breath, just like Santo's captive back in the woodland earlier tonight. I slam the door behind us, marching her over to the bed, then wheel away at the last second and aim for the armchair instead.

"Hey!" Holly pounds on my back with her little fists, but she's laughing too. Kicking and wriggling. "What the hell, Diego!"

When I collapse back into the armchair with her in my lap, she's red cheeked and grinning. Those arms slip around my neck like the world's sweetest collar.

"You're still not scared of me, huh?" I jiggle her on my lap, suddenly enjoying myself way too much. Headache? What headache? "You're gonna let the mean old mobster put his rough hands on you again?"

“Maybe.” Her saucy little smile—god, it kills me. Makes me want to kiss her and spank her and pet her hair all at once, and I need more goddamn hands. “But I’ll be checking in on the Governor’s daughter, Mr Cedrone. Don’t think I won’t.”

Holly punctuates her words with a stern tap on my nose, and Christ, she’s perfect when she’s bossy. Sitting up all righteous in my lap, back straight and eyes determined.

“Fine by me.” Her pajama pants are brushed cotton, so soft as I stroke my palms up her thighs. She smells like laundry powder and shampoo, and it’s so domestic it warms my aching heart. “I won’t ever lie to you, baby. Not about anything, but especially not something like that.”

Her smile is softer this time. “I know.”

The room is warm, the lighting dim. Glancing around, I’m almost embarrassed by my sparse existence, because there are barely any signs of life in here. It could be mistaken for one of the guest suites—if it weren’t for my wallet, phone and keys on the dresser, and the fallen whiskey glass on the rug.

That’s okay. All the more space for Holly’s stuff to spread, brightening up every corner of my world.

Will she wear this little white robe every night? What about *just* the robe, with nothing under it? I tease the belt undone, watching her steadily.

And Holly lets me.

Jesus, she doesn’t just let me. She leans back and shrugs her arms out of the sleeves, then tugs her pajama shirt over her

head. Baring her body.

The shirt lands somewhere over by the wall. Her nipples are hard already, dusky pink and delicious, and the minx arches her back, showing off for me.

“Perfect,” I rasp, cupping her. Weighing and squeezing. “Ah, Holly. You’re perfect all over. I knew you would be.”

The room was warm before she came in, but now it feels hotter than a sauna. Or maybe that’s just the way she’s got my heart pounding, my blood rushing through my veins. I’m not stopping to crack a window, that’s for sure; wouldn’t stop if the mansion burned to ash all around us, not now that I’ve got her.

Finally.

“I’m new to this,” Holly murmurs, shifting in my lap. Rubbing her ass over the lead pipe currently trying to burst its way through my boxers, and nibbling on her bottom lip like the world’s biggest tease. “So you’ll have to be patient with me, Diego. I might not be any good.”

“Impossible,” I say immediately, ducking my head to lick her nipple. Sure enough, my girl gasps and squirms against the rasp of my beard, gripping my shoulders for balance, and my mouth curves into a smile against her heated skin. “You feel that, baby? You feel how you respond to me? We were built for this, you and me.”

She’s hot and damp between her legs, scorching through those pajama pants with how badly she wants this. Thank god.

I stroke her there for a few minutes, up and down, up and down, until Holly huffs and scrambles off my lap to stand in front of the armchair.

“Not *that* patient,” she grumbles, shoving her pajamas down to her ankles. “I want to know what you feel like inside me before I die of old age.”

“So grouchy,” I tease, already working my belt open. “I’ll have to fuck that temper out of you.”

Her reluctant huff of laughter makes me grin. “Promises, promises.”

It takes some fumbling, in the end. We’re both nervous; both breathless; both panting with how badly we need to feel our bodies sink into each other. And the armchair is cramped and the leather keeps squeaking, but it’s still the best moment of my long, lonely life when Holly positions my cock at her entrance, her thighs trembling.

“Ready?”

Hell yes, I’m ready. I take her hips and squeeze.

“Don’t go easy on me, Holly. I may be an old man, but I can take it.”

“Oh, please. You’re not old.” She rolls her eyes as she sinks down, eyelids fluttering when she feels the stretch of my shaft pushing inside her. “Not... oh, god...”

“Take your time.” My thumb circles her clit, my calluses against her slick flesh. “I’ll fit, baby, you just take your time.”

“Uh-huh.” Her eyes are hazy; her nod is slow. Holly bites her lip as she circles her hips, feeling me press against every part of her. “You’re so...”

She trails off, chin dropping, and grips my shoulders for balance. I open my mouth to coax the rest of that sentence out of her, but Holly sinks down another few inches and steals my breath.

I’m still squeezing her hip with one hand. Circling her clit with my free thumb. Counting backward from one hundred and trying desperately not to notice the wet heat of her; the snug fit of her channel; the little puffs of breath against my neck.

“Baby,” I croak, then Holly sucks in a deep breath and sinks all the way down.

I tilt my head up at the ceiling, blinking away stars.

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Nine

Holly



Diego Cedrone is a very big man. He's muscled and strong, with thick, long fingers and hairy knuckles. When I played with his arm in the back of De Rossi's car earlier, I worked out I'd need both hands to wrap around his wrist. So I figured the enforcer must be large all over; that I'd be setting myself a challenge by taking him to bed.

Or to armchair, anyway.

Point is, I knew what I was getting myself in for.

At least: rationally, I knew. Intellectually, I knew. But there's a whole world between knowing something theoretically in the back of your mind, and working that hard, throbbing truth into your pussy.

Because Diego is *huge*. Thick and veined, with a ruddy head and big balls to match. It takes me lots of pauses and short gasps, takes several stops to regroup, and once I'm fully seated on the mobster's lap, I feel like I deserve some applause. The backs of my knees are sweating.

“You’re doing so well, baby.” Diego squeezes and releases my hip, staring up at the ceiling. He’s frowning in concentration, and I’m going to take that as a compliment. Diego’s throat bobs as he swallows. “Everything okay down there? You’re not in any pain, are you?”

I press my lips together, my chest suddenly so warm inside. Because as a mobster, this man’s whole life has been about doling out pain: drawing out confessions and giving warnings; meting out Santo De Rossi’s judgment. Yet with me stretched around his shaft, Diego’s eyes are tight with strain, and concern is etched on every single gruff feature. He swallows again, hard.

I pet his dark beard. “I’m good.”

“We can stop whenever you like. Or I could lick you instead, how about that? I’ve been wondering how you taste, baby, wondering it for weeks now—”

“I’m good,” I tell him again, wrapping my arms around his neck, trying to figure out how to soothe him. Men are visual creatures, right? “You wanna see what it looks like?”

Diego blows out a hard breath. Then he screws his eyes shut and drops his bristly chin. Peeks one eye open, then stares avidly at the sight between my thighs.

And listen: I’m no expert, but I think we look *good*. His shaft is slick and shining, my body stretching to let him in, and as I lean back on his lap, the head of his cock prods against my stomach.

“Jesus,” Diego grates out, spreading one hand over the sight of his length inside me. “*Jesus.*”

“Uh-huh.” I roll my hips, nerves sparking with each new brush of contact. “Can we keep going now?”

“*Yes.*”

And he’s everything I thought he would be. Strong and sturdy, his skin salty to the taste. Brutal and demanding, surging up beneath me to spear me on his shaft. But there’s also reverence in his eyes, and when he smooths his scarred hands along my body, petting and squeezing, I’ve never felt so treasured in my whole life.

“Holly. My Holly.”

Our bodies rock together, heat building between us. My cheeks are on fire, and the slick sounds of our bodies joining are so loud in the room.

“Never gonna let you go after this. You hear me? There’s nowhere you can run, baby. You’re mine now.”

The words are uttered like a threat, pressed against my mussed hair, but my heart beats brighter with each dark promise.

I don’t want to run from this man; don’t want to spend a single day apart. Why the hell would I ever want that? And his obsession with me? The possessive glint in his eye when he looks my way?

I love it. I can’t get enough.

“You’ve picked your man now, Holly, and I hope you like this cock, because it’s the only one you’ll ever take. But I’ll make it good for you, baby. I’ll make you cry out every day for the rest of our lives, you’ll see.”

I bury my smile in his throat, ears ringing with these filthy declarations.

Who knew the enforcer would be so chatty?

“Gonna put a ring on your finger and my seed in your belly. Is that what you want? Huh? A little baby of your own?”

Rough teeth scrape along my shoulder, and I let out a blissful sigh.

Yes, it’s what I want. *He’s* what I want. My scarred mobster. The man from my daydreams.

“Holly. You listening to this?”

I choke out a laugh, nodding my head, and his shaft is so thick, sliding in and out me as I roll my hips. It’s so intimate, I can feel his heartbeat down there.

“Yeah, I’m listening. I want it all, Diego.” Everything he’s offering me and more: I want it all.

His breath gusts past my ear. “Good. That’s settled, then.”

And it’s such a funny thing to say, such a weird way to settle things between us, but it’s perfect too. I wouldn’t change a single thing. And as Diego’s thumb finds my clit again, rubbing steady circles, my mouth drops open on a silent scream.

Blood rushes in my ears. I stiffen on his lap, muscles twitching. My whole body flashes boiling hot, nerves throwing off sparks, and I come and come and come until I crash against his chest with a ragged groan.

Yeesh.

His shirt buttons dig into my cheek. Definitely need to get him naked next time.

“Holly,” Diego says. “Fuck, Holly.”

He swells inside me, throbbing. Pulses once, twice, three times, both hands gripping my hips and holding us sealed tight together as if I might try and pull away. As if I don’t love his wet warmth spilling inside me.

Ha. He’ll learn.

“Mmph,” I say into his shoulder, leaving a drool patch on his shirt. “Oh my god. That felt good. That was good, right?”

“Yeah.” His breaths are ragged, his chest heaving against my cheek. “Yeah. Better than good. That was the best thing I’ve felt in my whole fucking life.”

And we sit there together, hot and sticky and rumped in our chair, swapping breaths back and forth and trading sweet kisses.

Next time, I tell him, we’ll try the bed. Or maybe the shower.

“Whatever you want, baby.” Diego’s beard tickles the top of my head as he kisses me there. “From now on, it’s whatever

you want.”

* * *

Three days later

I scoop up another handful of snow, my fingers numb inside the pair of leather gloves I borrowed from Diego this morning. The wind nips at my cheeks, and the midday sun is bright as I pat my handful against the snowman’s belly.

“The shape is all wrong,” Ruth murmurs, working on the lopsided white head. “His shoulders are quite wide, have you noticed? And his waist is trim. It’s too bad he hates everyone and everything or he’d be a real catch.”

I snort, bending down for another handful. We’re out on the De Rossi grounds, half-hidden by the hedge maze, and I’m so glad to see my sister relaxed and pink-cheeked that I could skip around the whole mansion.

I was so worried that Ruth would hate it here. That she’d be scared and on edge and it wouldn’t be good for the baby, and we’d have to find somewhere else to live, far away from Diego. My heart crumbled at the mere thought, but Ruth has settled in like one of the family.

Could I even bear being apart from him at this point? I don’t think so.

And: “We’ve got it!” Allegra calls, jogging across the grounds with Leah at her shoulder. Both women are dark-

haired and grinning, and there's a lump hidden under Allegra's sweater.

As the kingpin's sister, she was the only one brave enough for this mission. Frankly, I still can't believe she's got one, but that lump is incriminating as hell.

"We need sticks," Leah declares when she reaches us, hunting around on the ground. Ruth points her to the two we already fetched. "Ah, perfect."

Leah's married to another mobster—and though Nico and Diego aren't blood relations, she's already declared me her future sister-in-law. I smiled so hard that evening, my cheeks ached all the next day.

Can this be real? Can Ruth and I really slot in here so easily, welcomed into the warm arms of the mob?

"Oh, I love that one," I say as Allegra pulls the embroidered silk waistcoat from under her sweater. It's midnight blue, the fabric slippery and fine. Leah jabs both sticks into the snowman's body, and Allegra slings the waistcoat over his makeshift shoulders.

We all stand back, gazing at our work.

The snow-Santo is lumpy and lopsided, one stick-arm twice the size of the other. He's short, too, way shorter than the real deal, his squat body listing in the snow. Sometime while I was busy with the belly, Ruth stuck two pine needles above his pebble eyes, like grumpy little eyebrows.

Allegra cackles. “He’s perfect. Wait, I need a photo of this.”

And we’re too busy giggling and posing with our Franken-Santo to notice our men until they’re standing beside us, staring down in horror.

“Is that...?” Raul asks, glancing up at the mansion windows. The doctor looks paler than usual, his expression grim.

“Shit,” Nico says, and then he’s yanking the waistcoat away and kicking the snowman down, pelted with snowballs by his enraged wife. “Shit!”

“Bullies!” Leah yells. “Schoolyard bullies!”

“Give me that phone, Allegra. Delete that photo right now —”

Diego takes my arm and steers me away from the yells and peals of laughter. Ruth watches them all from one side, smiling calmly and stroking her belly.

“What were you thinking, baby?” Diego tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, shaking his head. His fingers are chilled from the cold, what with the borrowed gloves on my hands, and his scar is ghostly on his cheek. At least his beard’s keeping his chin warm. “Santo’s a kingpin, not a kindergarten teacher. If he caught you all with his waistcoat—”

“We were going to put it back!”

“Giggling and posing like that—”

“Oh, please.” I yank on Diego’s sleeve, just wanting to touch him. “We all know he’s locked away with the Edwards girl again. His *captive*. A meteor could hit and Santo wouldn’t notice.”

Diego’s mouth twitches, but he frowns down at me, all mock-stern. “Well, I had other plans for us this afternoon, but if you’re too busy trying your luck with the boss...”

“What plans?” I’m already bouncing on my heels in the snow. We’ve only been together for a few days, but I’ve learned that Diego has the *best* surprises, and it’s Christmas Eve. A time for miracles. “What are we doing?”

“Oh? You’re not too busy then?”

I tackle the mobster with all my weight, but we both know he only falls back into the white drifts ‘cause he’s humoring me. Still, any excuse to crawl on top of him and stuff snow down his collar. “Where are we *going*, huh?”

“To pick out a ring!” Diego yells, his deep rumbly laugh vibrating right through me. Then he catches my eye and goes all solemn. “If you want to, I mean. We can wait a while longer if you prefer.” Those big hands squeeze my waist through my winter coat, possessive and greedy, and he adds, “Not *too* long, though. Don’t leave me hanging. I’m not a patient man, remember?”

Me neither. I’m not patient when it comes to this, when it comes to *us*, and I want this man’s ring on my finger right this second. My cheeks are hot as I launch to my feet, bending down to yank on his coat sleeve. “Up. Up, up, up. Let’s go.”

It's a perfect day. Cold and crisp, the grounds echoing with laughter, and I haven't touched a damn vacuum in nearly a week.

I'm ready for this. For our next chapter.

Ready for anything, as long as it's with him.

* * *

Thanks for reading Holly & The Henchman! I hope you loved it. :)

To see the icy mob boss brought to his knees, check out [Kingpin All The Way](#). *I kidnapped the Governor's daughter for revenge. Now I'm fussing like a goddamn mother hen.*

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

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Teaser: Kingpin All The Way

She takes far too long to wake up. Under normal circumstances, patience is my forte: I will happily wait weeks, months or even years to ruin a man if it means my victory will taste all the sweeter. But Erin Edwards takes *hours* to wake up after being kidnapped last night, and by the time she stirs against the pillows, my temper is frayed.

I've already worn a track along the guest suite rug with my pacing. Already irritated myself with the constant need to check her pulse, her temperature, her rolled-back eyes.

"Mmph," she slurs, shoving her freckled face deeper into the pillows. Finally. There's a patch of drool beneath her chin, and I scowl at the damp fabric. Those cases are Egyptian cotton. "Wha'timesit?"

I suppose being drugged and abducted would be a blow to anyone's dignity. Still, I wrinkle my nose at her bedside, leaning back in the armchair and checking my watch.

"It is seven minutes past eight." I stifle a smirk when she jolts against the bed. The Governor's daughter scrambles upright, blinking around the room with bleary eyes, and it's clear that last night's sedative is still making her thoughts soupy. She hadn't even noticed I was here.

Amateur.

"Wha's... where am I? Who are *you*?"

Erin Edwards sways on the mattress, one arm pulled at an awkward angle behind her. Chocolate brown curls are wild around her shoulders, and those freckles spread over the bridge of her nose, blurring together like a permanent blush. We took her from her bed last night, and she's wearing a matching pajama set—a cream pinstripe shirt and tiny shorts.

The shorts are... compelling.

“I am Santo De Rossi, and you are at my home. As an honored guest,” I add with a cold smile.

Has she noticed the silk tie leashing her wrist to the bed frame yet? I don't think so. Good lord, how has this woman survived to adulthood?

Miss Edwards shivers, her eyes growing wide. “De... De Rossi? *The* Santo De Rossi?”

I incline my head, the fire popping in its grate across the room. It's hot in here—uncomfortably warm, really, but I had an odd flash of panic after bringing her in here that she might have gotten chilled outside in the snow. There were goosebumps on her bare legs.

I've only just kidnapped her, after all. Failing to take good care of her would be terribly wasteful. She's no use to me struck down by the flu.

“Oh!” My captive finally gapes at her wrist, wrapped tightly in blue silk, and yanks hard on the leash. The bronze bed frame doesn't even creak.

Solid. Every object in this mansion is well made—I pride myself on that fact.

“The more you pull, the tighter it gets.” The muscles in my back twinge as I stand, crossing to a side table with a jug of lemon water and two glasses. “I suggest you stop for the sake of your circulation.”

Cool water splashes into the first glass as I roll my stiff shoulders. Seems I’m getting too old to stand vigil all night without back strain. How troubling.

“I don’t understand,” Erin mumbles.

No, she wouldn’t. Why would this sheltered society girl ever expect to meet a mob boss? When would our paths ever cross without my divine intervention?

Erin Edwards is kept far from her father’s shady political dealings; far from everything important in her family, in fact. Apparently Edwards daughters are mere decoration.

Bizarre. When I held my own baby sister for the first time, I knew immediately that I’d burn the whole world down for her—and I am not a sentimental man. Governor Edwards is a dinosaur.

“Here. I expect you’re thirsty.”

Raul told me the sedative would dehydrate her, but my captive eyes the glass of lemon water in my hand like I’m holding out a hissing cobra. I suppose that’s fair. I have drugged her once already in the last twelve hours.

“Watch,” I command, then take a small mouthful from her glass, swallowing it down. There’s less water now, but at least she accepts the glass, sipping cautiously and peering up at me with wide eyes. Unexpected warmth spreads through my chest at the sight, chased swiftly by irritation.

Does this girl always look so guileless? Innocent and freckled and fucking *sweet*? Have I kidnapped a milkmaid? Good grief.

“Your father has made an error in judgment, Miss Edwards.” The armchair creaks as I sink back into it, my own glass in hand. I don’t need to explain myself, of course, but I’d prefer that she stopped trembling. “Several errors, in fact, and I’ve taken you as insurance that he won’t make any more.”

“Me?” She sways, her eyebrows pinching together.

I roll my eyes. Did she hit her head on that car trunk?
“Yes. Obviously you.”

“But he won’t...” Erin trails off, biting her bottom lip, and I stare at the small gap between her front teeth for a moment before shaking my head.

Focus.

It has been a very long night.

“Won’t care?” That’s what she stopped herself from saying. From admitting out loud—either to herself or to me. “Not privately, perhaps, but your father cares greatly about his public image and you are part of that, Erin. There are plenty of ways to pressure him with you, believe me.”

“Oh.”

I wait, knuckles working against each other, but the Governor’s daughter doesn’t say any more. Just that one dejected syllable, then her chin drops and she stares at her wrist again. Tugs feebly on her tie.

“Stop pulling on it,” I snap. “I told you, you’ll hurt yourself.”

She mutters something under her breath, and it’s probably better that I didn’t hear it. There’s a headache brewing behind my left eye.

“You won’t be here long.” Who exactly am I trying to reassure now? I push the rest of my water into her hand, swapping it out for her empty glass, then stride across the guest suite. “You are a tool for me to use against your father, and once you are no longer useful, I will return you home. You have my word.”

“Your word,” Erin murmurs. She’s still staring around the room, dazed by last night’s sedative, and I have the bizarre urge to bundle her up in a blanket. Maybe check her temperature one last time before I go.

Will she remember any of this? Is the girl even lucid?

Fuck. I need to catch up on sleep.

“Don’t try to escape,” I warn, my grip tight on the door knob. “And don’t irritate me. If you cooperate, I assure you the time will fly.”

“Fly,” she repeats again numbly, and her hand is shaky as she sips from the water glass.

There’s a burning sensation behind my ribs. I wrench the door open and get the hell out of there.

* * *

Check out [Kingpin All The Way!](#)

xxx

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About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT instalove with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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